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CUBA AND THE CUBAN QUESTION

BY SYDNEY BROOKS

THE last few months have made it abundantly clear that the present year is destined to be a fateful one, possibly a crucial one, in the history of Cuba and of Cuban-American relations. It opened, it may be remembered, with a peremptory note of warning addressed by the American Government to the Cuban President. There will probably always be some question as to how far that note, with its veiled threat of intervention, was justified, and whether it was one of Mr. Knox's characteristic strokes "off his own bat" or whether it was prompted by the Cuban Government itself. There can, however, be no question of its sobering effects. Cuba at the time was passing through a typically Spanish-American "crisis." The veterans of the War of Independence had started a campaign of proscription against all office-holders of Spanish sympathies; they had forced Congress to suspend the Civil Service laws for eighteen months; official heads were falling one by one; the army showed signs of a desire to take a hand in the agitation; and there was good reason to believe that the ferment was rapidly communicating itself to the negroes. Add to all this that the preceding six months had seen a succession of exciting incidents and that four or five candidates were already in the field for the Presidential nomination, clashing, intriguing, denouncing, with increasing vehemence—and there seemed all the material for a lively explosion. It was at that juncture that Mr. Knox caused to be handed to President Gomez a sharply worded admonition, hinting not obscurely that unless the internal situation in the island improved the United States might be obliged to take forcible action. The note was so clearly in line with President Gomez's own interests in the matter that he was believed in many quarters to have himself suggested it. It greatly,

at any rate, strengthened his hands; it enabled him, while decapitating office-holders right and left in compliance with the decrees of the Veterans' Association, to point out that they could only continue their propaganda at the risk of imperiling the very existence of the Republic; it shocked Cuba into momentary tranquillity; and though a disturbing element was afterward introduced by a judgment of the Supreme Court pronouncing the suspension of the Civil Service laws unconstitutional, still the situation has never been so precarious since the presentation of the American note as it was before it.

Other excitements, however, have supervened; and in spite of President Taft's genial denial in March of the many rumors that Washington was contemplating and preparing for another intervention, and in spite of Mr. Knox's visit to Havana in April—where he was received with, perhaps, more politeness than enthusiasm and where his speeches, while reassuring, were not without an undercurrent of shrewd advice—the feeling has steadily grown that Cuba and Cuban-American relations are nearing the rapids. In the last week of May this suspicion was intensified by the news of a negro uprising in the Eastern Province and by the promptness with which the United States, while disclaiming any thought of "intervention," collected and despatched to the disturbed area a strong force of American marines. But all these, while interesting and significant incidents, are not in themselves sufficiently abnormal to make 1912 stand out with any unusual conspicuousness in the Cuban calendar. What really focuses interest on the island and gives rise to the apprehension that in one way or another the present year will leave a decisive mark on its fortunes is, that on November 1st, the Cubans will be electing another President. Even in a country as stable, civilized, and experienced as the United States, it happens from time to time that a Presidential election generates a certain amount of heat and confusion and is apt to throw men off their balance. But in a country like Cuba, where all politics inevitably turn on personalities and the spoils, and are therefore fused through and through with the bitterest contentiousness, the normal excitement of a Presidential campaign becomes little less than a frenzy; and whether the Republic is capable of weathering the tropical tornado that is now rushing upon it is precisely the question

that 1912 is expected to settle or at least to illumine. Having twice visited the island for the purpose of inquiring into its political and economic conditions, I should like, from the standpoint of an Englishman, to venture some impressions of a problem which, though primarily it concerns Cubans and Americans, is also of interest to all students of politics.

In some ways the experiment of a self-governing Cuba is being tried under conditions more favorable to a happy issue than obtain in the case of any other South or Central American Republic. The United States went into the war with Spain pledged to effect the independence of Cuba. The language in which Congress expressed the national determination was an explicit answer to the European taunt that the war was one of aggression and conquest. Congress resolved "that the people of the island of Cuba are, and of right ought to be, free and independent," and from that went on to affirm "that the United States hereby disclaims any disposition or intention to exercise sovereignty, jurisdiction, or control over said island, except for the pacification thereof, and asserts its determination, when that is accomplished, to leave the government and control of the island to its people." The substantial part of this pledge of self-denial has, I think, been adequately fulfilled. The Americans have twice occupied and governed Cuba and have twice voluntarily withdrawn from it. They called a new State into being as they said they would, and they left it to the people of that State to work out their own salvation. But the Republic they hatched was not by any means the "free and independent" power to which the Congressional resolutions pointed. Before turning over the island to the Cubans the Americans took good care to see that their own national interests were amply safeguarded. They imposed conditions and they obliged the Cubans to embody those conditions in their Constitution as part of the organic law of the land; and the Cuban Republic, when it finally stepped on to the international stage, was seen at once to be a wholly new variety of the half-autonomous, half-vassal State. It is bound not to permit any foreign power to acquire control over its territory; not to contract any debt on which the ordinary revenues are insufficient to pay the interest and furnish a sinking-fund for the principal; to lease certain coaling and naval stations to the United States; to continue to improve the sanitation of its

cities; and to allow the American to intervene "for the preservation of Cuban independence and the maintenance of a Government adequate for the protection of life, property, and individual liberty."

I do not quarrel with any of these restrictions, though I can well understand the disappointment they caused in Cuba and the suspicion with which they are regarded by other South-American Republics. Americans had the good sense to recognize that in Cuba's own interest it was vital that her relations with the United States should be put on a definite footing, and that the American Government should stand forth as a guarantor that the new-born State was not to be allowed to follow the too familiar course of most Spanish-American Republics. It is, indeed, precisely because the United States is in the near background, vitally concerned for commercial, financial, strategic, and sanitary reasons in Cuba's good behavior, prompt to suppress disorder, and with a veto power over her financial conduct, that one is able to assert that the experiment of self-government is being made under more promising conditions in Cuba than exist anywhere else in or around the southern hemisphere. Cuba cannot go to war; she cannot indulge in the caprices that have earned Venezuela and Nicaragua a noxious immortality; there can be no defaulting in the matter of the debt; she cannot lapse into anything more serious than temporary tumult and confusion; as a field for the investment of capital she offers practically as much security as though she were not merely under the American ægis, but a State in the American Union.

On the other hand, there are many factors pulling in an opposite direction and tending to make an autonomous Cuban Republic an extremely delicate and hazardous enterprise. Their lamentable and tumultuous past has deprived the people of any chance of gaining experience in self-government; they have but barely emerged from four centuries of political servitude and torpor; they inherit a baneful tradition of corruption and of mistrust of all who are set in authority over them, whether Spaniards, Americans, or their own fellow-countrymen; their percentage of illiteracy, while diminishing, is still inordinately high; one-third of them are negroes; they are a people of mixed extraction which has in it no strain that has yet shown political capacity; their climate, while delightful for the transient

visitor, has the political drawback of making a "revolution" an agreeable pastime and of weakening energy and will-power; the form of government they at present enjoy was not self-evolved, but imposed upon them from without; and as the possessors of a phenomenally rich and undeveloped land they are surrounded by promoters, exploiters, speculators, and concession-hunters whose activities, naturally, do not make for political health. These were the people whom the Americans, without any real preliminary training—for General Wood's administration of Cuba only lasted four years and, while a magnificent record of reforms, could not do more than touch the external aspects of things—presented with a Republic, a written Constitution, and universal suffrage, the three political ingredients that the oldest and most mature and experienced of peoples have found it hard to blend into a consistent whole.

And besides all these obstacles to honest and stable government, the Cubans have further to contend with the obstacle of the Platt Amendment. In saying that I seem to contradict my testimony of a moment ago to the good sense of the Americans in establishing a suzerainty or protectorate over Cuba and to the value of their presence and authority in the background in promoting security. But the truth is that the Platt Amendment is a double-edged weapon, and a source both of strength and of weakness to the rulers of the island. It strengthens the Cuban Republic because the knowledge that disorder and factional disputes, if carried beyond a certain point, will infallibly involve American intervention, tends to keep political grievances and animosities within bounds—there being nothing that the great majority of the Cuban people so heartily dread and abominate as another American administration of their country. On the other hand, it weakens the Cuban Republic because it sets a premium on insurrectionary violence and puts it in the power of what might be a small and wholly unrepresentative faction to bring about a state of affairs that Americans might find it hard to distinguish from anarchy. Cuba's wealth is mainly sugar, and sugar is a product that both in the field and in the mill is peculiarly exposed to destruction. A torch applied to the cane at the right season, a few bombs judiciously exploded in the mills, a mile or so of railway track torn up, and millions of dollars' worth of property might be destroyed in a few hours. Noth-

ing is easier than for a disgruntled Cuban to bring about American intervention by proclaiming himself a general, collecting a few score of loafers, and proceeding to burn and wreck right and left. This enormous and unparalleled power of destruction in a few reckless hands is a factor to be always remembered. The tail in Cuba wags the dog; and every Cuban Government is exposed not merely to the threat of American intervention, but to the ability of its opponents or of any discontented faction to make good that threat. The most perfect and efficient and energetic administration conceivable could not prevent a casual band of vandals from doing immense damage to property, and especially to foreign-owned property, in Cuba; and its failure to suppress any outbreak of the kind would argue nothing as to its competency to discharge all the normal duties of government. Two consequences follow from this state of things. In the first place, a Cuban Government can be blackmailed by its enemies who have it in their power to provoke American intervention if their demands are refused. In the second place, Americans, seeing all the visible signs of disorder, seeing definite danger to "life, property, and individual liberty," are misled into thinking the trouble much more serious than it really is.

But there is another way in which the Platt Amendment operates to Cuba's disadvantage. Not only is it in itself an elastic instrument that could be stretched at need to cover almost anything, but its presence unconsciously suggests to officials at Washington that they have a right to interfere whenever the Cuban Government commits, or contemplates committing, some act of which they disapprove. Any one who has been at all behind the scenes of Cuban politics and administration knows perfectly well that the amount of supervision exercised by the American Minister in Havana goes far beyond the mere terms of the Platt Amendment and is frequently enforced in matters that exclusively concern the Cubans themselves, and that it is mere gallantry to speak of the Cubans as a self-governing people. In this way the Cuban administration is largely deprived of the moral authority that every Government ought to possess, and the political inexperience which it is the sincere wish, I believe, of the American people to remove is really perpetuated. The Cubans never quite know where they are or with whom they are dealing. One day the American

Minister receives instructions from the State Department; the next day he may receive contradictory instructions from the War Department. A habit of meddling with the details of Cuban administration and of hampering and hauling up Cuban Ministers in the discharge of the ordinary functions of government has thus grown up, greatly to the resentment of the rulers of the island and to the serious impairment of whatever sense of responsibility they may possess. To the Platt Amendment they have contrived to accommodate themselves, though they wish that its true scope and meaning could be more definitely defined. But to the constant and inquisitorial form of supervision that is now becoming customary they take strong exception. They believe it to be the forerunner of intervention or, at any rate, of a concerted attempt to govern Cuba without the bother and expense of a formal occupation of the island. The Cubans are a suspicious people and, laughable as it may sound to Americans, they have persuaded themselves that there are officials in the War Department at Washington who are deliberately conspiring against their independence without the knowledge or approval of the American people, and that secret and powerful influences are always at work blackening their character, painting Cuba as a chaos of corruption, and familiarizing the American mind with the idea that intervention is only a matter of time.

It is, I take it, undoubtedly the fact that many American interests in Cuba would prefer to see the Republic extinguished and the island come again under an American, or a joint Cuban-American, government; and that these interests work for intervention just as similar interests fifteen years ago worked to bring Great Britain and the Transvaal to loggerheads. It is also possibly the fact that, in the absence of any great or well-informed public or Congressional interest in Cuba and in the absence, too, of any department specially dedicated to the consideration of the Cuban and of similar questions, a certain incoherency of policy may have been developed and that subordinate officials in the State and War departments at Washington may at times have been more zealous than discreet in their dealings with the Cuban Government. But I have too much faith in the pacific and unaggressive temper of the American people and in the good sense of American statesmen to believe that they will allow themselves to be gulled by self-

seeking "interests," or that they will ever resort to the desperate remedy of armed intervention in Cuba except for causes that would place their action beyond cavil or criticism. So far as I have been able to judge the popular attitude toward the Cuban question, I should say that most Americans wish the island nothing but well, earnestly desire to see the experiment of self-government succeed, do not in the least covet Cuba, and would unhesitatingly reject any proposal to incorporate it in the American Union.

It remains, therefore, to consider whether the Cubans by their own conduct have furnished or are likely to furnish any valid excuse for intervention. What has been their record as a Republic? They have certainly followed the admirable example set them during the first American occupation in matters of sanitation. Not only has yellow fever been stamped out, but the Cuban death rate is to-day the lowest but one in the whole world; and I should be very greatly surprised if questions of public health were ever again to affect Cuban-American relations. Then, again, and especially under the Gomez administration, there has been a steady material development. Foreign capital has poured into the island, highways and railroads and bridges have been multiplied, harbors have been dredged, communications by telephone and telegraph have been greatly extended, the cities are rapidly furnishing themselves with the accessories and conveniences of up-to-date communities, the commerce and productivity of the island have been strikingly stimulated. Cuban credit, moreover, has been well maintained and Cuban securities rank deservedly high on all the leading stock exchanges. Although the administration is conducted on a lavish and undoubtedly extravagant scale, and periodically runs short of money toward the end of each fiscal year, its financial conduct on the whole has been satisfactory. That is to say, the ordinary revenues of the country are amply sufficient to provide interest and sinking-fund on the debt that has been contracted; and so long as that is the case the Platt Amendment, so far as it deals with finance, is necessarily dormant. Then, too, I think it may fairly be said that, in spite of a few sporadic disturbances, the Gomez Government has preserved public peace and order with adequate completeness. It has been a strong government and has not hesitated, whenever necessary, to use the Rural Guards. In that respect, indeed, it

is probably as efficient and determined a government as is ever likely to be established under Cuban auspices; and I question whether there was ever any serious ground for doubting its ability to cope with the recent negro uprising.

But to all this there is another and much less pleasing side. Undoubtedly graft is rampant in Havana and, indeed, throughout the whole island. If it would be an exaggeration to say that the country is being sold block by block, it is well within the truth to say that many concessions have been granted for illicit considerations that ought never to have been granted at all, and that the government is honeycombed with jobbery and corruption. It is true that in most, but not in all cases, the public has benefited by being furnished with facilities that otherwise would not have been forthcoming; but no one seriously disputes the fact that graft has assumed sinister proportions and is one of the main pivots of Cuban politics. Moreover, the fiscal policy of the Government throws a wholly disproportionate burden on the poor, who are still further oppressed by an absence of small holdings and a lack of opportunities for getting credit on any but Asiatic terms, and who are further demoralized by the revival of the lottery. A very competent observer, Mr. Forbes Lindsay, has justly remarked that Cuba presents the curious anomaly of "a highly prosperous country with an extremely needy population." The native Cubans are tending more and more to become the dispossessed employees of alien capitalists, and, were the sugar crop to be ruined by bad weather or were a period of commercial depression to set in, an acute situation would undoubtedly arise. Meanwhile it is enough to note it as a blot and a danger-point that the Cuban Government has shown itself to be far more zealous in the service of "the interests" than in that of "the people."

Another source of peril to the stability of the Republic is politics, meaning by politics not a clash of ideas or of principles, but a ceaseless, feverish struggle of rival personalities and ambitions to get possession of the machinery of government and use it for their own enrichment. All through the Spanish-speaking world politics at bottom are nothing but a faction fight between the Ins and the Outs. In some countries the contest is waged according to fixed rules, one party giving way to the other after a definite period in office and honorably leaving some of the plums

for the enjoyment of its successors. But Cuba has not yet attained to even that moderate height of sobriety and tolerance. Its political struggles are wars to the knife; a group that has once got control of the offices will do anything rather than give them up; honest elections are not considered by anybody as a serious possibility; the natural retort of a defeated party is a "revolution," and in the madness of political revenge there is always a danger of such a tumult as will put the independence of the country in jeopardy. It was from causes similar to these that the Palma Government in 1906 came to its downfall, and nobody who watches the present fury of strife inside the Liberal party can be sure that history will not repeat itself. I never gathered while I was in Cuba that there was much danger of a military revolt, but in the combined influence of graft, of poverty and unemployment, and of politics I found many who foretold the doom of the Republic.

To an outsider it seems as though the question before the American people comes down to this: "What degree of disorder, corruption, misgovernment, and so on, are we prepared to tolerate in Cuba in order that the islanders may continue to test their capacity for ruling themselves?" And if I might venture to indicate the kind of reply that in my opinion ought to be returned to this query, it would take the form of an adjuration to the American people to tolerate just as much as they possibly can. It can only, at best, be after repeated stumblings and backslidings, amid many scandals, with frequent lapses from the democratic ideal, to the accompaniment of a continuous commotion, and by the exercise, on the part of the United States, of an extraordinary patience, sympathy, and forbearance that the Cubans can win their way to political stability. Americans intend, I sincerely believe, to give Cuba every chance. But Cuba as a matter of fact will be given no chance at all if Americans expect from her the impossible and judge her conduct by American or British standards, or by any standards at all that do not take account of her peculiar history and of the temperament, idiosyncrasies, and mental habits of her people. A clean and orderly system of administration is something that the Cubans cannot reasonably be asked to evolve for many years to come. Yet some Americans, I note, apparently ask it of them already. So far as I can see, there is bound to be corruption in Cuban politics,

recurrent unrest, a certain amount of disorder, and, possibly, some bloodshed. All this I take to be inevitable. The question for Americans is whether they will put up with it as an unpleasant but necessary phase of Cuban evolution, or whether they will use it as a reason for making an end of the whole experiment. If they insist that the Cuban Republic shall conform to Anglo-Saxon conceptions of probity and efficiency, then it might just as well not have come into existence. If, on the other hand, they are prepared to overlook much that is harmful and unsatisfactory in Cuban conditions, then the Cuban Republic may not only endure, but may gradually master the supremely complex art of self-government. A literal view of American responsibilities under the Platt Amendment means the speedy end of Cuban autonomy. A liberal view, on the other hand, means, or may mean, its perpetuation. And I need hardly add that another American occupation of the island would be regarded with extreme suspicion and resentment by all the Republics of South America, and would raise a crop of very delicate domestic problems, fiscal and otherwise. It may, of course, come to that in the end. But so far, while there is much in the state of Cuba that one can only regard with grave misgivings, nothing definite has occurred to warrant a third intervention; and if Americans from time to time will turn a tactfully blind eye on what is happening in Havana, and will remember that the shortcomings they deplore can only be really eradicated by the action of the Cubans themselves, there is something more than the possibility that their generous treatment of Cuba may meet the reward it deserves.

SYDNEY BROOKS.